

*<Zechariah portrayal>*

picture screencapture from  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5h-M1vmWJkA>; credit: LUMO

Hello. I am Zechariah, a priest of the order of Abī'jah, and I am exceedingly blessed!

Let me tell you about it – now that I can speak again, I want to sing God's praises whenever and wherever I can!

Two years ago, I was grateful to God for life and community, but nowhere near as happy as I am now. My beautiful wife Elizabeth and I, old as we are, were childless and had given up hope of having any. I think it was harder for her than for me, as I was able to throw myself into work at the synagogue.

Then came the time for our order to serve the temple in Jerusalem, so I went. God was smiling on me, though I did not know it. When my section was on duty, I was chosen by lot – God's hand at work – to enter the inner sanctuary of the temple, the holy of holies, and make the incense offering upon the altar.

This is a great honor! And I thanked and praised God for it in my heart. Everyone else was just outside, praying as this important offering to the Lord was made. I was very careful to do everything just the

way I had been taught would honor the Almighty.

Just after I lit the incense, I almost knocked the whole thing to the floor in surprise, because a terrifying figure was standing next to the altar in the holy of holies with me! I froze, not knowing what to do, hoping God was not angry with my failings.

But then the angel, for such it was, told me news that was even more shocking than his presence there! He said that Elizabeth and I would be the proud parents of a new prophet, named John, who was to have the power of Elijah and prepare the people for God!

I could not believe it. We were past the age of childbearing; and why "John"? There is no one in our family with that name! Like a faithless fool forgetting about our forebears Abraham and Sarah, I asked for proof that what he said was true.

The angel - Gabriel was his name - was indignant. He told me that because I did not believe the message He brought directly from God, that I would not be able to speak until it was fulfilled. I tried to object, to apologize, but no sound came out. I was mute!

The angel disappeared, leaving me to finish up what I had been doing with the incense offering. I cleaned the tools with silent prayer running constantly across my lips, asking forgiveness for my doubt and

giving thanks for the blessing to come. I may have taken a little longer at that part than usual, as I was trying to compose myself and gather my thoughts. The Almighty is more overwhelming than I imagined, and I only saw His messenger at that!

When I stepped out of the sanctuary, everyone stared at me because I had taken so long. One of the temple priests asked me if everything was okay, and without thinking I tried to answer – but of course, no sound came out. Sensing something had happened, he – and others – asked if the offering had been done properly, to which I nodded.

They then started asking questions about what had happened, and since I could not speak, I tried to explain through hand motions. All that they could get out of my waving my arms about was that I had had a vision – and that was more due to guesswork than to understanding what I was trying to communicate.

Finally, I borrowed a writing tablet and wrote for the leaders in the temple to know what had happened, answering their questions with my poor scrawl. No one was quite sure what to make of it; I think some of them thought I made it all up, an Abraham-wanna-be who dreamed of having a mighty prophet as a son!

I stayed to help in the temple until my time of service was completed, though my not speaking made it

very awkward. I could not lead prayers, I could not direct people on where to go or what to do when they came to worship. About all I was good for was fetching and cleaning equipment.

I suppose it was just as well. Had I been able to speak, I would have been crowing and bragging about how the Lord was to bless my family at last, and that might have left others feeling less wanted by God. I spent enough years that way that I am grateful God spared those in the temple from my ego.

When I finally got home, my dear Elizabeth greeted me warmly as always, though she was taken aback by my not speaking. I had had one of my priestly order accompany me so that he could explain to her that I could not talk after having had a vision in the temple. After he left, poor Elizabeth was dumbfounded about what to do with me.

At first we tried communicating through hand motions and a lot of yes/no questions, but it was difficult. I was not as much use at the synagogue, so I spent more time at home getting in Elizabeth's way. We got a writing tablet for our home, which helped – though I had to get her to sound out some words; she is not as educated as I am and does not read as well. Although, when I could not speak, she certainly read aloud much better than I did!

Elizabeth was astounded to hear we would be having a son, but believed me when I wrote that to her because by then she had started being sick each morning. I had no idea what women go through, bearing children!

It was fortunate that young Mary was able to come and help her in those last few months; I wanted to make it easier on my wonderful wife as our son started making it difficult for her even to bend over.

I made it clear to her that our son was to be called "John." I had forgotten to tell the priests that; it was not one of the questions they had asked when I was writing about my vision in the temple to them. At his bris, they expected to call him Zechariah, after me - and if God Himself had not told me to call him something different, he would have been Zechariah.

I motioned for the tablet and wrote on it, "His name is John." Suddenly, I could speak again! I was so happy, I burst into song, praising God for showing favor and mercy on His people, from Abraham and David to my son, a prophet of the Most High.

With praise and thanksgiving, I personally know that God brings light and mercy into the darkness of our sinful lives! *Yehovah yadah!*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> O LORD I will give thanks to You!

## Gospel lesson

Last week we heard from the Gospel of Mark; this week we hear a similar story from the Gospel of John:



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/john-baptist/>

### John 1:6-8, 19-28 (NRSV)

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

<sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

<sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

<sup>19</sup> This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"

<sup>20</sup> He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah."

<sup>21</sup> And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No."

<sup>22</sup> Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

<sup>23</sup> He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the

wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said.

<sup>24</sup> Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.

<sup>25</sup> They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"

<sup>26</sup> John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know,

<sup>27</sup> the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

<sup>28</sup> This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

*The word of God for the people of God*

<Hymn "Wild and Lone the Prophet's Voice" TFWS #2089>

## Message: Our Just Peace



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/our-spirit-waits/third-sunday-of-advent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/third-sunday-of-advent-year-b-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Glorious Lord who gives us everything to celebrate, as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and

- abide in our hearts,  
That in anticipating Your return, we may be filled  
with enduring joy, thankfulness, and generosity.  
Amen.

Our Advent series “Our Spirit Waits” brings us this week to “Our Fierce Joy.”

“In the midst of all the traditions, let Gaudete Sunday also be a practice session, a rehearsal for living with fierce joy in the midst of the tension of the now and the not yet.”

I spent an hour on Friday in the waiting room of a doctor’s office. There was not much there for entertainment, just a TV screen going on one wall and some medical information brochures. I had brought work to do, so it was not a problem for me.



picture from  
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/girl-is-looking-at-her-toys-3662752/>;  
credit: cottonbro studio

A young mother was there with her 3-1/2 year old daughter. The daughter was full of life, interested in everything about her, and her mother – thinking it would be a quick in & out for them – had not brought toys to keep her occupied, just some crayons and paper which the girl used and then got bored with.

Friendly, she came over and greeted me, showing me



her drawing. I complimented her on it as her mother scurried over to try to prevent her from bothering me - I reassured Mom that her daughter was adorable.

The little girl kept trying different things to stay occupied, checking out everything and chattering with her mother about what she found, but there was not much there. She started spinning, apparently getting dizzy and savoring the effect for a moment or two before spinning again.

She bumped into me at the end of a spin, and I asked her if she would like to sing some songs. We sang the ABCs, the itsy bitsy spider, and the head, shoulders, knees, and toes songs.

Finally the mom was able to be seen, and it was very quick. As she and her daughter got ready to go, the girl climbed into my lap and gave me a hug. Her mother thanked me for being so nice with her; I thanked the mom for sharing her daughter with us.

As they headed out, I was struck by the exuberance the youngster had for life, a joy to live, and I thought about how that is the kind of joy Jesus brings for us, that God wants us to have. I then pondered why not everybody lives in that kind of joy.

It is easy and somewhat pithy to say we do it to ourselves, with making bad choices and sinning. But

sometimes things happen to us that we never chose; accidents happen, and sometimes we bear the brunt of others' poor choices. In a way, as we accrue experiences, we grow out of taking joy in life. We seem to lose hope and care for the beauty of the moment, getting caught up in dealing with the world as we think responsible adults should.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/elisha-siege/>

Back in the Old Testament days of Isaiah, we hear that he was bringing a message of hope to people who were oppressed, broken-hearted, captive, in mourning, and had been robbed. The psalmist speaks of people weeping – and with all those sin-driven actions taken against them, it is no wonder! That is not how we were created to be.

God intercedes to restore people. That message of Isaiah? One of hope: not of undoing the past, but of building forward toward revealing the glory of God on earth, toward a covenant that cannot be broken.

God keeps blessing us. Even when we think life is the best or worst it has ever been, God keeps blessing us. How do we respond?



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/gnpi-012-john-baptist/>

John the baptizer came, calling for people to repent and make straight the way of the Lord. His parents were delighted with his arrival, but the Pharisees, priests and Levites from Jerusalem did not know what to make of him. They questioned who he was, what he was doing, and what his credentials were.

Doubters in this world question who God is, what it means to be Christian, and why we believe in God. John was clear with **his** doubters, that the Lord was among the people, going to do more in their lives than he ever could. Do **you** tell people clearly (through your words and actions) that the Holy Spirit is moving in our lives, that Jesus did more for each of us than we could ever do for one another?



picture from *MMMS collection*

Some people want proof of God's existence, deliberately refusing to look around at the handiwork of nature and give God thanks for it. Our Creator sent messengers to proclaim the glory of God, that we can open ourselves to receive God's blessings. Do not put up blockages; make straight the way of the Lord!

Like that curious and playful little girl in the doctor's office who knew her mother was near and loves her, we know because of Jesus that God is with us and loves us. As Paul reminded the Thessalonians, we can rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances, because God is faithful.



*picture from*

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/our-spirit-waits/third-sunday-of-advent-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/third-sunday-of-advent-year-b-graphics>

Test everything in the light of faith and love. Hold fast to what is good, giving thanks to God with fierce joy for the Good News of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit with us. Let that joy push you beyond your comfort zone into sharing the love of Christ with others, serving their needs and building community that God may be glorified through you.

Let our fierce joy because of Jesus uplift this world in all times and places, through the power of the Holy Spirit and with great thanks to our Creator!